

All He Could Do by 65writings

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Summary:

The night is cold, and a lot of things are wrong: the gate had reopened, the party is slowly living under one roof, Joyce Byers is wearing as thin as ever, and there's something bothering Steve Harrington.

Basically: Steve Harrington sits alone mulling over something that's got his tongue; Billy Hargrove knows what it is.

All He Could Do

Steve's sitting on the Byers' front porch swing, his feet—shoeless, only kept warm by his ankle-socks stained brown and green from running in the grass playing football in the yard with the kids that morning—planted firmly against the deck. He can feel shreds of the peeling white-wash poking at his feet, yet he does not move. He's slumped forwards, forehead in his hands, fingers scratching absently at his hairline, and eyes staring vacantly at the ground.

Sundown came only ten-or-some minutes ago and the sky and the house are aglow with the eerie purple-blue of descending night. The moon, though, is bright—white and full-faced—and beams down as if to prolong the day. If he were to look up, he could still see far into the distance until the teal grass begins to grow rampant and unruly, jumping and twisting into the tree line which stands in the distance. There, the spring trees are in the waning phase between bursting with brilliant flowers in pale, yet warm shades and dropping petals for green leaves, flat like disks and silver on their bellies. And amid the trees are animals—band-tailed pigeons, Indiana bats, and crickets—all singing their night-time lullabies to the applause of the shivering canopy looming overhead.

But Steve does not look up. He keeps his head firmly planted in his hands, heels digging into his eye sockets, breathing out of his mouth. The night time chill has begun to sneak under his clothes like skeletal fingers pressing against his spine, his neck, his ankles because he has sat so still and silent for so long. A shiver runs up his back and suddenly he's trembling, almost like he might burst into tears.

"Steve?" a voice calls.

He jerks up, flinging his head back and scooting forward in the seat. A loose tear—maybe just his eyes watering—rolls down his cheek and he wipes it away with the back of his hand. He blinks a couple of times as the screen door swings open with the sound of rust grinding between metal and the shudder of the frame.

"Oh, Steve, honey," Ms. Byers says. She sounds out of breath and looks it too with her button eyes round and shiny and her mouth open, exasperated. "I've been looking almost everywhere for you. I thought—well, Billy was asking where you went. I'll just go let him know."

Steve nods, shifting his eyes back to the ground and rubbing the

bridge of his nose between his middle fingers. He rubs up, down, back up, and then over his eyebrows, stopping to massage his temples.

Ms. Byers had appeared to be going inside, uncut bangs flipped over her small nose as she turns over her shoulder and reaches for the doorknob to the inside door to pull it closed behind her. But she stops, and moves her face around the mesh to see him clearly.

He looks worse-off than he's been in a long while—his hair shaggy, his head heavy in his hands, his shoulder blades prominent enough to show under his t-shirt. She'd noticed earlier in the day that something was off; he got out of bed an hour later than usual, ate breakfast much slower with time to stir his oatmeal five or six times between each bite, and his smile collapsed on one side. He still ran around with the kids, tossing the football back and forth, running in circles around Lucas and Eleven who gave him the best run for his money, and high-fiving them when they'd fairly bested him. But he was tired afterwards, instead of energized like normal. And he'd pulled this disappearing act, which was perhaps his finale of the day.

"You doin' okay?"

Steve nods again without moving his hands from his temples. He can't afford to; they serve as the only barrier between her and the hot tears welling in his eyes.

But Steve knows that he can't lie to Joyce Byers.

She is merciful though. "Alright," she says, "but you let me know what I can do for you, Steve."

Steve nods.

She doesn't move from the door right away. She stands there, waiting for something—like a sign, or for him to break. But he doesn't move. He just sits there and breaths in and out slowly as he stares into the grass beyond the porch.

"Should I tell Billy that you're taking some alone time?"

A beat passes and Steve sits stone-still. He doesn't fidget, he doesn't blink, he doesn't breathe; he just rolls the thought around in his tired brain. Then he straightens up, dropping his hands into his lap and rolling his thumb into his palm like he's massaging out the kinks, or just trying to grind his bones together until there's nothing left of him. He knows his face is red, that he has tear-stains over the slope of his cheeks, that his eyelashes are thick and wet and stuck together, that he's suddenly bouncing his knee and furrowing his brows.

And then Steve just nods.

Joyce disappears back into the house wordlessly, pulling her lip under and closing the screen door as quietly as she can manage. Steve watches her disappear out of his peripheral vision without taking his eyes off of the woods in the distance.

The tree line is still for a long time. Goosebumps raise up on his arms, along his folded stomach, over his thighs, and he draws into himself—though it does him no good.

Eventually, the dark shadow of a bird leaps out of a tree and flies high and then dips low as it travels away into the purple sky. Another bird follows quickly in its wake. From here, Steve can tell that its wings are much bigger and its tail much longer. It never reaches quite the height the previous bird had before it dips low and disappears into the leaves. Above them, the clouds are spread thin and move slow enough that you can hardly tell that they're moving at all unless you watch them in relation to something else. Steve stares upwards long enough for the tip of a rectangular cloud begin to fade into the distant purple. The moon hangs just to his left; it's too bright to look at head-on. So he looks down, into the grass and begins to count the white-headed dandelions that speckle the lawn.

The door creaks again after what may have been five or forty-five minutes. Steve has since stopped crying, though, and turns to meet his visitor with his eyes.

It's Billy.

Billy Hargrove clears his throat quietly as he steps away from the screen door. It swings quickly behind him, though just before it slams, he catches it around the handle and eases it into place—careful and gentle and cautious. In his other hand he holds a thick blanket to his chest. It's solid grey-green on one side and a thick cream-colored fabric on the other.

"Joyce," he begins, not looking at Steve, rather at his boots as he takes a few small steps across the deck. His voice is caught in his throat. The boards creak under his feet. "Joyce was going to bring this out to you, but she looked a bit shot, so I brought it myself."

He approaches Steve—gets just close enough—and then shakes out the blanket so that it unfurls. It's so long that it still just brushes the curls of peeling paint and breaks some loose. Together they maneuver it around Steve's shoulders. Steve pulls it from one side and Billy feeds it from the other so that he doesn't have to get any closer than a safe distance away. They don't speak. The clicking of bugs and chatter of the night-birds and the clinking of the metal links as Steve

involuntarily rocks the swing are the only sounds. All that passes between them is a quiet, "there," from Billy as he lets go of the last of the blanket, and a murmured, "thank you," from Steve as he pulls the blanket snugly around himself. They don't look at one another either. Steve directs his gaze back to the trees and Billy stares at his shoes some-more. It's like, if they were to meet eyes, the world might end, but really, really slowly.

"I told her to go to bed," Billy says suddenly. His voice is of that low, gravelly tone that he uses when he's tired. His eyelids are in a way half-closed, too. "Joyce, I mean."

Steve nods and drops his eyes down to the edge of the blanket where it overlaps across his knees. Now they're both looking towards the ground.

"She seems all strung out. Like she's a fraying wire... or something." Steve swallows.

It's true. Joyce is like a wire. Physically, she's as thin as a needle and never stops, always alive and humming with something, be it a song or a fire. But in her head, she's sputtering from being pulled too tight, buzzing with too much electricity, never flipping the switch off. Steve feels a bit guilty, a bit responsible. He'd taken all the hospitality she'd offered him after the gate had reopened—sleeping in her backroom on the couch next to all of the books piled in uneven stacks and cluttered boxes in misshapen pyramids along all four walls. In exchange for what? Driving Will to school in the mornings? Adding an additional place at her table each night? Giving her enough anxiety to make five hours of sleep feel like one?

Granted, the whole party one by one has moved into her house over the last few months. First, it was Hopper and Eleven. They've kept Hopper's house out in the woods, but from the looks of it, should the world not come to an end over the dimensional rip, they wouldn't move back out of there anyways. Then it was the Wheeler's. Nancy and Mike, though they're only there part time, have been spending more and more nights there with Mike awake and talking to the adults about things he knows for a fact, and Nancy sleeping in Johnathan's room and behaving herself better than the average senior in high school. Then it was Billy. Max came a weekend later, but Billy wound up there not on his own accord. For awhile, once the school had found out about Billy living with the Byers and rumors started bubbling about this and about that, Billy had vehemently denied it and acted to Steve's face like something was keeping him

there against his will. But then Steve moved in, too, after his nightmares and paranoia became unbearable and living alone in that huge house where a girl died caused him so much stress that Johnathan had confronted him about his receding hairline. Then, Steve had moved in, too, and seen Billy and Eleven playing chess on the floor and sharing popcorn from the same bowl, and he knew then, that it was a whole different kind of force holding him hostage. But Steve, in a way, though he was surrounded by a crew of other misfits and rescues, felt like an alien. He felt unnecessary, unwanted, a burden.

Though when he thinks about it for too long, he stops himself. Joyce wouldn't've wanted him to feel that way.

"You haven't seemed so hot yourself," Billy says. He pets at the ground with the toe of his shoe.

Steve shrugs and pulls back at the corner of his fingernail. "Been better."

"Yeah."

The night grows quiet around them in a way, like it's retreating to give them some space.

Billy goes on. "I feel like," he mumbles and then lifts his head. He squints his blue eyes in that way he does and chews just the corner of his mouth. "I feel like I might've... I feel like I have something to do with it. You feeling shit and all."

Steve doesn't move. He doesn't nod. He doesn't shake his head. He doesn't say anything. He doesn't give Billy any help at all.

"And this, this is really hard for me to do—" Billy's hands pat at his pockets, looking for his pack of cigarettes which aren't there. He's been picking smokes off of Hopper for the last month or so so now he doesn't have any of his own. His fingers, instead, find his lighter and he habitually flicks the roller with his thumb. Just once a tiny flame alights at the end of it. The next few times it's only a blue and yellow spark spitting out seemingly from the tip of his finger. Then finally, it glows with no fire at all. "I think I owe you an apology. A real, proper one."

Steve just... Steve just nods.

"Can I look you in the eyes when I say it?"

It's such a strange request. And it takes every last nerve to lose the battle with his mind before he can finally lift his eyes to meet Billy's.

The words come immediately. Like a flood breaking loose from a damn—one that's been cracked and wearing for years, but only just

now broke loose. "I'm sorry," he says. "Really, truly sorry. For giving you shit. For giving you hell. For beating on your friends, and for... for breaking that damn plate over your head. And I'm sorry for every fucking finger I've ever laid on you. Your friends didn't deserve it. Max didn't deserve it. You didn't fucking deserve it."

That's when Billy looks away. He looks like he is going to be sick all of a sudden—pale as a ghost, tears welling up in his eyes, hands drawing to his stomach. He turns his body away from Steve and instead out over the field. But he's not done. "You don't have to forgive me. Hell, I don't think I'd want you to forgive me," he stops, takes a breath in and a breath out. He shakes his head and swallows, raising his hands to brace behind his neck. "It's just... the other night? It's all that and myself and my dad and... that's why I did it. All that built up."

His lips press together then and his eyebrows furrow. He shakes his head firmly and turns over his shoulder. "I've got to go inside," he says.

And Steve nods.

Author's Note:

I wrote this all today and as a reward for finally seeing a piece all the way through, I'm posting it here.

Please leave any critiques/comments/compliments.